

Q. Last week you seemed to kind of get fired up when you were talking to the teenagers from Colorado. You said that the politicians in Northern Ireland were behaving akin to school children. Do you feel, after all the work that you've done on this project, that perhaps it was misplaced, and you should have perhaps pushed in a place more like Africa, where they have thousands of people dying from ethnic strife, instead of 3,500 over 30 years?

Q. And if I can have a third Irish question, what role, if any, do you expect to play, Mr. President, in breaking the deadlock?

The President. Okay, let me answer the Irish questions; then I'll come back to the "Should we have done something else?"

I've talked to Senator Mitchell, and he is willing to spend some time—he can't go back full-time for another year or 2, but I'd like to put this in some—at least I'd like to tell you how I look at it.

Obviously, I am very disappointed at the breakdown of the process here. But I do think it's important to note that neither side wants to abandon the Good Friday agreement. And that's very important. It's also important to note that everybody agrees on what their responsibilities are and what the other side's responsibilities are, and everybody agrees that it all has to be done by a date certain.

So they have agreed to break out the two areas causing problems, the decommissioning and the standing up to the executive, and try to figure out how they can unlock that, and Mo Mowlam, as you pointed out, is working hard on it, and they've asked Senator Mitchell to come back and do some work on it, and my instinct is that it will be resolved.

Now, let me say in terms of your characterization, here's the problem. To the outsiders—I told the parties that to the outsiders—no one, none of us outside, even somebody like me that's been so involved in this, no one will understand if this thing breaks down over who goes first; that that did sound like the kind of argument that young people have, you know. Who goes first?

Underneath that, there's something deeper. The Protestants are afraid that the IRA

will never disarm if they let the Sinn Fein go into the executive branch, and the IRA do not believe, since the agreement did not require decommissioning as a condition of getting into the executive branch, they don't want to have to spend the rest of their lives being told that it wasn't the vote of the people, it wasn't the Good Friday accord, it was what the Unionists and Great Britain did to force them to give up their arms that got them to disarm. They believe that would, in effect, require them to disavow what they've done for 30 years.

And what they're saying is, "When we surrender our arms, we're surrendering to our people. Our people voted for this. We are surrendering to the will of the people that we represent." So when you put it in that textured way on both sides, it makes it clear why it becomes a difficult issue. And I can't think of anybody better to try to work through it than George Mitchell, because he's got it all in his head and he's put 3 years into it. But my instinct is that we will get this worked out.

Now, you asked about did I think we had misplaced our energies. I don't think so. We have—for one thing, we don't have a stronger partner in the world than Great Britain, and for another, we don't have a bigger ethnic group in America than the Irish, and we're tied by blood and emotion to the Irish struggle. I also think that it has enormous symbolism, beyond the size of the country and the number who have died. And if it can be resolved, I think it will give great impetus to the forces of peace throughout the world. So I don't believe for a moment we made a mistake.

But let me also say I think we should be more involved in Africa, and I've tried to involve us more in Africa. I did everything I could to head off that civil war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. It's not a civil war; they are two separate countries, but they once were together and they're basically now arguing over the divorce settlement. And I don't mean to trivialize it in that characterization. And we are still actively involved in trying to stop that.

Reverend Jackson played a significant role in trying to end the awful carnage in Sierra Leone, and I'm very grateful for that. We're